Captains

Many fine captains with incredible backgrounds and experience have sailed with the Alaska Marine Highway System. Sailing under the leadership and mentoring example of Captain Richard Twain Hofstad (1925 – 2003), a man born in Petersburg, Alaska on the shores of Wrangell Narrows, was unforgettable.

Particularly memorable were our stops on the M/V *Tustumena* at the Columbia Glacier outside of Valdez, conning the ship carefully among icebergs, searching for leads through the ice, getting close to the face of the massive glacier until the twin peaks of an unnamed mountain, surrounded by the glacier, disappeared from our view behind the wall of ice. Stopping the ship and blowing a long blast on the ship's whistle with all onboard at the rails while watching the calving icebergs crash thunderously into the sea was spectacular. Large splashes sent rolling waves toward the ship. Steeped in local knowledge, Captain Hofstad gave a lengthy and detailed dissertation over the public address system about the Columbia Glacier.

Possessing a prodigious memory, he made a life-long study of Alaska's coast, having read *U.S. Coast Pilot*, volumes 8 and 9 in detail, the journals of Captain James Cook and Captain George Vancouver, and Bancroft's *History of Alaska*. More than anything else, he studied nautical charts and took great pleasure in reading about the Harriman Expedition of 1899, an expedition traversing Alaska's coast, with a special emphasis on the Columbia Glacier. We younger officers stood in wonderment at the depth and variety of our captain's knowledge.

Piloting the *Tustumena* through exciting places "off the beaten path," Hofstad pioneered routes for the Alaska Marine Highway in its earlier years, developing the routes in Prince William Sound with the M/V *Chilkat* in 1968.

He became the original captain of the M/V *E.L. Bartlett* in 1969.

In 1979, Hofstad pioneered the Westward Run between Kodiak and King Cove along the Alaska Peninsula with the *Tustumena*, along with his opposite, Captain Andy D. Santos. Santos joined the *Tustumena* in the latter 1970's as a captain, having served for years as a "crackerjack" chief mate of the coastal tanker, *Alaska Standard*. Captain Santos knew the routes along the Alaska Peninsula very well, possessing a wealth of Alaskan pilotage knowledge. "Both men (Hofstad and Santos) pushed hard on the idea with the State of Alaska to extend Alaska Marine Highway service to the Alaska Peninsula and eastern Aleutians," noted Jack V. Johnson, chief mate at the time of these inaugural voyages.

We never did know where Hofstad had learned about the older mail boat routes along the Alaska Peninsula until much later. Our chief mate, Jack V. Johnson, had sailed on those earlier mail boats, both the *Garland* and the *Expansion*. He knew all the old courses. Jack Johnson first laid down the track lines on our charts for the *Tustumena* to follow on her routes along the Alaska Peninsula to Cold Bay. In 1983, the route was extended farther west to the eastern Aleutians to include Cold Bay and Dutch Harbor. In 1993, the ports of Akutan and False Pass were added to the schedule.

Jack V. Johnson is on the left with binoculars, as is Captain Andy Santos on the right. Going through Bainbridge Passage in Prince William Sound on the Tustumena c. 1982.

"In piloting a ship, never trust anyone but yourself," cautioned Captain Hofstad. However, he relied heavily upon Johnson's extensive local knowledge of the old mail boat routes as we traversed through uncharted

waters off the Alaska Peninsula. Using preliminary charts showing only soundings along sparse track lines with lots empty, blank space with no depth soundings in between, Captain Hofstad followed in the wake of the old mail boats, cautiously following their tried and proven routes successfully.

Many years later, accurate surveys were completed, new nautical charts were published, and we could finally see what rock-infested waters we had passed through. Before new charts had been issued, Captain Hofstad piloted our ship with the greatest confidence and without incident. These early voyages were some of the most thrilling times of my career, giving anyone a feeling of doing something truly important, a feeling of excitement, of wide-open spaces, of virgin landscapes, of unlimited freedom, and a feeling of leaving the congested world astern in our wake.

Captain Robert Smith on the right, standing with Tustumena Chief Purser, Theodore "Teddy" Gerwer on the left. c. 1980. Notice the plexi-glass covered chart of the Gulf of Alaska on the far left. This is where we drew the weather forecast as described in Tustumena Radio Shack.

Sailing westward with Captain Hofstad, or with the skillful and knowledgeable Captain Andy Santos, or with the considerably versatile relief master, Captain Robert Smith, on some of the first westward voyages during the late 1970's and early 1980's was an emotional experience unlike any other. We observed with admiration as Captain Smith once docked the *Tustumena* in King Cove with a seventy-knot head wind. Smith seemed not to mind and showed no stress to the crew. Smith was an excellent captain and a man with steel nerves with whom we always felt safe.

Many who sailed with Captain Hofstad had called him a nautical genius. Often, his mind raced ahead of his speech, pausing long as he collected his

thoughts, and then resuming his sentence where he had left off. One had to be patient when listening to him. As a disciple of Rear Admiral David Watson Taylor, one of America's greatest Naval architects and marine engineers, Captain Hofstad had read deeply and studied extensively Taylor's engineering classic *Speed and Power of Ships*, with a particular emphasis on ship calculations and propulsion.

Hofstad was especially fond of Taylor's *Variation of Efficiency of Propulsion with Variation of Propeller Diameter and Revolutions*. When discussing our ship, the *Tustumena*, Hofstad often began by saying, "According to Admiral Taylor…" Hofstad worked the formulae and calculated the numbers, recommending that the *Tustumena*'s propellers be trimmed by three inches to reduce propeller cavitation and improve fuel efficiency, sacrificing one-half a knot in speed, from 13.8 knots to 13.3 knots.

Using his weather senses, Hofstad had an uncanny ability to predict accurately the weather and sea conditions. In heavy weather, particularly near the Barren Islands, between Homer and Kodiak, he taught how to tack a ship, changing course to get the best angle on high seas, or avoid making too much heavy freezing spray, exercising patience to wait for the "flat spot" before making a course change with hard-over rudder.

Waking from a sound sleep, he came to the wheelhouse wearing his red bathrobe and slippers while leaning over the chart table, his hands and eyes roving over the chart, plotting his next strategy amid the roar of the wind, in the night blackness, the cold and freezing spray just outside. As a floating engine, a ship can never out run the sea or wind. "You see our course on the chart?" he would ask. "Which way is the weather coming? What will that do to us? What is an easier way?" Then gently suggesting, "Wouldn't it be easier if we tacked this direction for while?"

In the early 1980's, we encountered monstrous seas on a sunny day with little wind and in sight of downtown Kodiak. These extraordinary waves were estimated by Captain Hofstad to have been eighty feet high. We had just exited the North Entrance Channel at Hutchinson Reef Buoy #4 and set a course for Marmot Strait, but finding ourselves in a deep trough with tall waves looming high on the starboard side. We could not go directly toward Marmot Strait. Captain Hofstad maintained the conn and turned the *Tustumena* into the oncoming waves. Though he gave a precise course to steer, he added a qualification, "more or less." It was all a helmsman could do to steer an approximate course in the general direction our captain wanted to go. Unable to turn around safely and return to Kodiak, the farther out we went, the larger the waves became. We had passengers onboard and vehicles lashed securely to car deck.

Our good ship struggled mightily, and our good captain read the sea, searching for a flat spot, that is, an area where the sea is without waves lasting long enough to turn the ship around safely and put the sea astern and prevent a violent roll or from being struck broadside by a huge wave and possibly broach. Finally, after a long struggle over mountainous seas, a flat spot emerged, and Captain Hofstad wasted no time, giving the helm order of "hard left rudder!" Our ship answered the helm and came around swiftly. Our stern shook and shuddered and soon the big waves were "abaft the beam." We fled toward Marmot Strait. Our ship rode easier, but these incredible waves loomed over us when we were at the bottom of a trough and their onrushing speed out paced our ship.

Riding to the top of a wave, our stern descended down the backside and we were looking up at the sky. The next wave would lift the stern high and we were looking down into the depths of the trough. Relative wind was knocking off the tops of the waves with a menacing curl of water as they raced past us toward Afognak Island. We made it safely to Marmot Strait, in the shelter of

Marmot Island. There, the sea surged, but the big waves could not reach us. We jogged in a three-mile circle for a number of hours waiting for the seas outside to diminish.

We later found out from the National Weather Service that these waves were generated by a dying Pacific typhoon that made its way into the Gulf of Alaska. When the seas became more manageable, Captain Hofstad directed our course northward toward Tonki Cape and then to the Barren Islands. As we worked our way toward Homer, the large wave train had slowly expended its energy by crashing upon the Afognak Island shore.

Winds can blow to 80 and 100 knots, seas can rise to forty or more feet in the winter, especially in the area of the Barren Islands. Bitter cold with sea smoke rising, winter sailing is surreal, as though floating on a rough surface of cold, smoking liquid nitrogen. It is a time of freezing spray, ice accumulation, roaring wind, large seas, and cold darkness. Often, a storm petrel is observed flying through our search light beam as we try to see large waves before they strike the ship. Many nights, Captain Hofstad slept in his captain's chair in the wheelhouse, his head rolling with the roll, plunge, and uplift of the ship as though it was a natural thing for him to do.

Captain Richard Twain Hofstad on the right standing with photographer John Rain of Sitka. Here, we are passing the captain's boyhood home on the shores of Scow Bay, Wrangell Narrows, on our return voyage from Seattle shipyard to Seward, Alaska. c. 1983

Just when we thought he might be in a deep sleep in his chair, he would waken and say, "Slow down, the water's cold and can crack the hull if we're not careful," or, "Bring her to the right another twenty degrees." Crack the hull we did on one memorable voyage near the Barren Islands. Feeling a

pronounced shock from below through our feet, we knew something had let go. It was a strange sensation, and as a seaman later described, “The bow just seemed to flutter away before coming back down.”

Upon inspection in the main void tank below the car deck, we discovered that two main longitudinal beams on both port and starboard sides above the keel had broken in half, just below the break of the wheelhouse, ripping to within an inch of the skin of the ship. Limping into Seward for emergency repairs, Captain Hofstad quipped, “I won’t take this ship out of the bay until this is fixed.”

Hofstad had performed several daring rescues. In one example during stormy seas in the Gulf of Alaska, he located the disabled sailboat *Wind Dance* and was able to radio a position to the Coast Guard for a helicopter rescue. Three days later, he located the sinking F/V *Seafarer* off the Barren Islands and again relayed their position to the Coast Guard for a successful helicopter rescue. Captain Hofstad received awards on behalf of the *Tustumena* and her crew from Alaska’s Governor Jay Hammond “for heroic performances in answering the call of not one, but two distressed vessels in mountainous seas off the rugged coast of Alaska on October 14 and 17, 1977.”[1]

Captain Hofstad had gone to sea for most of his life, and had sailed for the U.S Army in Alaska during World War II. His knowledge of the coast of Alaska was encyclopedic, and his skills at ship handling were automatic and natural to him. He counseled aspiring officers, “When your sea time is enough (365 days) for the next license upgrade, take the examination. Don’t let any grass grown under you.” Captain Hofstad advocated Admiral Lord Nelson’s advice:

“*Men* [and women] *treated well serve well*.”

Working my way up the ranks, I soon became an unlimited second mate. At that point, Captain Hofstad began training me in ship handling with the

Tustumena's engine order telegraph. Calling me out to the starboard bridge wing unexpectedly one day at Port Lions on Kodiak Island, he said, "Hopkins, come out here." A bridge wing is where a ship handler stands to see the side of the ship and the closing gap between the ship and the dock, and the location where maneuvering alongside takes place to complete a landing or to depart from a dock. I gulped, and with a hand gesture, he directed me toward the engine order telegraph and docking platform on the starboard bridge wing.

"Stand here," he said, "You're going to back the ship out of here." It was like my father teaching me how to drive a pickup truck with a stick shift and a clutch. We let go our mooring lines and Hofstad gently said, "Put the starboard engine on half astern. Now watch the stern move to port. No need to look forward, remember that most of the ship is aft." Observing Captain Hofstad, I began to make sense out of his maneuvering strategies and actions.

I learned very quickly from Captain Hofstad that one of the keys of good ship handling was to allow a helmsman to steer the ship almost right up to the dock before stepping out on the bridge wing to complete the task. "A helmsman," he explained, "can maintain the heading you want, steering closer to the dock a degree or two, or away from the dock a degree or two as directed, and maintain that heading. In this way, a ship handler has firmer control of the vessel."

Hofstad taught how to "walk a ship sideways" in the wind or current, how to "cushion a landing," and how to "pivot," by holding the stern in place and swing the bow around the pivot point, and how to "back a twin-screw ship going astern and control its direction." Other maneuvers he taught were "spinning the ship around in its own water," or using a spring line to stop the ship at just the right location on a dock. Captain Hofstad could not only read the sea and the weather, he could make a ship dance.

What a ride! What a captain!

Captain Harold Payne (1921 – 2002) was, in my opinion, the greatest shipmaster the Alaska Marine Highway System has ever produced. Payne was a kind man, and some took advantage of his good nature, but very little ever escaped his watchful eyes. Captain Payne held his judgments of people to himself, saying only, “Leopards never change their spots.” Our captain was a benign dictator, sometimes taking his meals with the crew, never speaking down in condescension, but horizontally in two-way speech, yet, there was no doubt who was in command. Unspoken, but observed in Captain Payne’s character, “new skippers, and old ones, should keep their egos in check.”

Captain Harold Payne on the right, sitting on a life jacket box on the port bridge wing of the Malaspina with Captain Douglas Johnson on the left. c. 1988.

Using his leadership style and considerable nautical skills for the behalf of others and for the good of his ship, Payne was deeply respected among our fleet. This fine man was the captain who had rescued sixty-six passengers and four injured crewmembers from the burning Norwegian cruise ship *Meteor* on the early morning of May 22, 1971. The *Meteor* was returning from an Alaskan cruise and only seven hours away from its final destination in Vancouver, British Columbia.

While southbound off Texada Island, some ten miles north of Sisters Island Light in the Strait of Georgia, British Columbia, a mattress fire inside the forward crew quarters expanded killing thirty-three crewmembers. For some reason, these crewmembers were trapped and could not escape to the upper

decks. Captain Payne with his chief mate, Walter Jackinsky of Ninilchik, Alaska, and the crew of the northbound *Malaspina* went to the *Meteor*'s aid.

Smoke was pouring from the portholes of the forward crew quarters. Desperate crewmembers had their heads poking outside the portholes trying to find fresh air. Captain Payne had Jackinsky prepare and lower away the *Malaspina* lifeboats. Within two hours of receiving the Mayday call from the *Meteor*, the *Malaspina* had rescued the survivors from the burning ship; many still in their nightgowns, and then brought them to safety in Vancouver. Both Captain Payne and Walter Jackinsky[2] received citations from the U.S. Maritime Administration for "the highest traditions of the U.S. Merchant Marine."[3]

A quiet, but thoroughly competent, honorable man with penetrating eyes, no one could handle a ship better with such grace and ease as Harold Payne in all weathers and current conditions. As a child, before the creation of the Washington State Ferry System, Payne had been raised onboard his father's private sector ferryboat in Puget Sound on the Keystone to Port Townsend route. In 1943, at the age of twenty-two, Payne earned an unlimited third mate ocean license. Like Captain Hofstad, Payne had sailed between Seattle and Alaska for the U.S. Army during World War II. Payne was all business and liked to tell us that he was "old school."

After the war, Payne was captain of the tug *Vesta Miller* working log tows out of Seattle and towing cargo barges between Seattle, Valdez, Seward and Anchorage. "The tugs were a challenge for me," he humbly noted. "I remember one time with a tandem tow we went around East Chugach Island and Cape Elizabeth (western tip of the Kenai Peninsula) to enter Cook Inlet, but it was too rough for us and we ended up behind East Amatuli Island in the Barren Islands and jogged there for two days." When the Alaska Marine Highway System began in 1963, Payne

signed on as a second mate. Our larger ships began sailing the Skagway to Seattle route in 1968 and Payne received command of his beloved *Malaspina*.

Ship handling was second nature to him, and as his chief mate, he began teaching me important skills, saying, “Ninety percent of all ship handling is in one’s approach to a dock. If it is a bad approach, you will work hard to recover and dock the vessel. If the approach is good, it will be less work and easier on the engines with fewer engine commands.” Payne was respectful of his engines, and of the marine engineers below in the engine room who monitored and maintained them.

Payne taught to “view the current as your friend, let it do a lot of the work in ship handling,” adding, “knowing your ship’s maneuvering capabilities in combination with the current can be accomplished very easily.”

Payne taught to “feel” the ship, that is, feel it losing momentum through your feet, or feel the ship’s engines through your fingertips when touching the engine controls. “A ship travels faster at nighttime than a ship handler thinks,” he often cautioned.

Payne taught to “know the state of the tides and currents at all times and observe any current streams swirling around dock fenders and pilings.”

Payne taught to “gauge the wind” by watching the Alaska state flag flying above the wheelhouse, or by observing the exhaust issuing from the stack, or by reading the surface of the water. Very little intimidated Captain Payne, though he confessed, “I did back away from Skagway a couple of times when the wind was blowing so hard (70 or 80) I thought my eyeballs would blow out.”

Payne taught situational awareness and never letting ones guard down at any

time.

With any good captain, there is an element of luck. Standing with him one stormy night on the port bridge wing while approaching southbound to our dock in Ketchikan, southeast wind blowing 50 knots, rain beating furiously against our faces, a barge moored at the adjacent shipyard dock stood in the way of our approach. Payne came in wide to avoid the barge all the while slowing the *Malaspina* down. Strong wind set the ship rapidly toward obstructive barge, and Payne pushed down on the ship's throttles to speed up and clear the barge. *Malaspina*'s stern missed striking the barge by only two feet. Payne turned toward me with a smile, and with his right hand raised and his index and middle fingers crossed, he said, "Some nights are like this."

Where Captain Hofstad had taught the basics of ship handling, Captain Payne came along and polished me in ship handling, like smoothing a rough stone, giving me plenty of opportunities to undock and dock his vessel while under his competent and observant eyes.

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another… Proverbs 27:17

No detail was too big or too small for him. Anxious to use the bow thruster when maneuvering, Captain Payne could read my mind, placing his hand on the bow thruster control to block my impulse saying, "Not yet." Payne believed in using a bow thruster sparingly. When backing away from a dock, Payne would not have his *Malaspina* shaking and shuddering when backing astern. With him, everything was smooth, easy, and graceful. A shaking and shuddering *Malaspina* would incur his immediate displeasure.

I began to earn his trust slowly, attempting to handle his ship as he wished it to be handled, good approaches with fewer engine commands. Soon, he would simply say, "Bill, take it into Skagway. I'll be below having lunch in the

officer's mess room."

Captain Payne was a master of Wrangell Narrows and Peril Strait. I say this humbly, for none was better. It is from him that I began to learn "the numbers" for dealing with these difficult waterways. Payne's methods became a part of my thought processes. No longer having to expend mental energy on the numbers, they became a part of my procedural memory, taking me to a higher level of experience.

Sailing under Captain Payne's leadership and instruction was the best thing that could have happened to me as a young deck officer with the Alaska Marine Highway System. Payne taught Wrangell Narrows by standing off to one side, yet close to the engine controls, usually behind my right shoulder, as I conned his vessel through "the Ditch." I can still hear his soothing voice in my mind speaking softly, saying "Now," to indicate that it was the time to put the rudder over ten or fifteen degrees and come to the next course. If the ship was swinging too slowly for his taste, he would say, "Giver her more rudder," or, if the ship was swinging too fast, "Easy on the rudder," or, "Check her up."

"Giver her more snoose," or "Kick her up a notch," Payne would say, both phrases meaning to increase the propeller pitch to increase power, or, "Drop her down a peg," or "Ease her back a little," both phrases meaning to reduce the propeller pitch to decrease power.

By doing this, I learned the timing for making critical course changes, how much rudder to use and how much power to apply. A day finally came when I was conning his beautiful *Malaspina* through Wrangell Narrows when he fell asleep in his captain's chair. The able seaman on the helm, steering the ship, brought the captain's slumber to my attention noting, "The Old Man really does trust you

now." I doubted that he was truly asleep, but that he was testing me.

Captain Hofstad once advised, "A mate can learn more from a bad captain than a good captain because you'll see the things you shouldn't do." There is comforting truth to this statement. However, being a student of good shipmasters serves anyone well. In due course, all observing officers who fall into a good captain's orbit are placed on solid foundations. Honored by the State of Alaska in 1989, Captain Harold Payne became the Commodore of the Alaska Marine Highway fleet before retiring in 1990. Captain Hofstad was similarly honored a few years later.

Written and Photographs Provided by Captain Bill Hopkins, AMHS Retired

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[1] Rohrbeck, Marian, *Alaska's Cruise*, Ruralite, Forest Grove, Oregon, August 1980, pp. 24, 25

[2] Revered by everyone who ever sailed with him, Captain Walter Jackinsky later became the master of the Alaska Marine Highway's M/V *E.L. Bartlett* serving the communities of Prince William Sound.

[3] Pels, Jacquelin Benson, *Any Tonnage Any Ocean – Conversations with a Resolute Alaskan, Captain Walter Jackinsky Jr. of Ninilchik, 34-Year Veteran Of The Alaska Marine Highway System*, Hardscratch Press, Walnut Creek, California, 2004, pp. 123 - 125